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**A Comparative Analysis of Effective School Board Leadership:
The Case of Gwinnett County and Atlanta City Public Schools**

Joshua Allen Garner

A Practicum Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Public Administration

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Department of Political Science and International Affairs

Master of Public Administration Program

College of Humanities & Social Sciences

Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

Certificate of Approval

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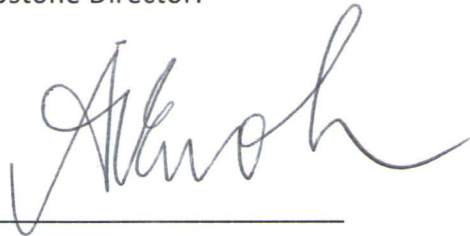
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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Almoh", is written over a horizontal line.

A Comparative Analysis of Effective School Board Leadership: The Case of Gwinnett County and Atlanta City Public Schools

Executive Summary

A quality education is essential in determining the success of future generations. All too often K-12 school systems fail to meet the expectations of success held by students, parents, and the community. On the other hand, there are school systems that surpass expectations of success held by stake holders of the school system. Exemplifying this phenomenon is the case of Atlanta Public Schools, who were placed on probation by the accreditation agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the case of Gwinnett County Public Schools, who were awarded the 2010 Broad Award for minority student achievement (Torres 2011) (The Broad Prize 2011). These opposing cases call into question the essential problem of this analysis: Why do some school systems fail while others succeed?

This case study serves two purposes. First, the study argues that the reason some school systems fail while others succeed is due to the leadership dimensions focused on by the school board, which is the ultimate leadership of the school system. Secondly, through a literature review, leadership dimensions are identified and organized into a benchmarking tool that can be used to gauge the effectiveness of a school board.

Using the identified leadership dimensions as a guide, the analysis concludes with a look into both the Gwinnett County Board of Education and the Atlanta Board of Education. The aim is to gauge the school boards against the leadership dimensions of the benchmarking tool to determine if these leadership dimensions are truly present in a successful school system and absent in a seemingly failing school system.

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To God be the glory.

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A Comparative Analysis of Effective School Board Leadership: The Case of Gwinnett County and Atlanta City Public Schools

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A Comparative Analysis of Effective School Board Leadership: The Case of Gwinnett County and Atlanta City Public Schools

Introduction

In the wake of the famous Atlanta Public Schools' cheating scandal, national attention has been drawn to a serious leadership failure in this public school system. Recently in Georgia, both Dekalb County Public Schools and Atlanta Public Schools have served a probationary accreditation period administered by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Torres 2011). These specific cases will be discussed in more detail in this analysis, but the point made is that in the past year, in the Atlanta regional area alone, there have been significant school system failures.

Despite the aforementioned failures, some school system success stories exist. In 2010, the Gwinnett County Public School system, also an Atlanta area school system, won the Broad Prize, which is an award given to "honor school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievements while reducing gaps among poor and minority students" (The Broad Prize 2011). Additionally, the Cobb County School system, an Atlanta area school system, was recognized for its graduating seniors' average SAT score being significantly higher than state and national averages (Cobb County School District 2011).

The cases mentioned above are significant in the lives of those directly involved. Students, parents, administrators, and teachers have had life-changing moments in the wake of the failures and successes of these Atlanta area public schools. The concern at hand, however, and the issue that will be directly addressed in this case is the question: Why do some school systems fail while others succeed?

To answer this question, this analysis will comparatively examine two school systems: one succeeding and the other failing. Taking examples close to the Atlanta regional area, this analysis will look at the recent cases with the Gwinnett County School system and Atlanta Public School system.

Gwinnett County Public Schools has experienced success over the past few years. The system has enjoyed the reward of the Broad Prize in 2010 for the overall performance and improvement in achievements and reducing gaps among minority students (The Broad Prize 2011). Part of the success is having increased levels of minority participation in SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement exams. Additionally, a recent achievement for Gwinnett County Public Schools is having 32 seniors named 2012 National Achievement Scholarship Program semifinalists (Gwinnett County Public Schools 2011). Something which could have led to these results is a link to Accountability Reports, found on the Gwinnett County Public Schools website. These reports list well-focused goals and action steps on how an individual school in Gwinnett County School system performs. It also lists how the school fared in the past year to reach the goals in all academic standards (Gwinnett County Public Schools 2011).

The success and recognition of these achievements should be passed broadly over the spectrum of the school system. Indeed students, teachers, parents, administrators, and school leadership worked diligently and intentionally to reach their goals. The school system's vision of becoming "a system of world-class schools" presents the uninformed reader with a sense of unity and focus on leadership throughout the school system from the very top to the very bottom of the organizational structure (Gwinnett County Public Schools 2011). This success also seems to be coming from the direction and focus of the top leaders, the school board, and superintendents of Gwinnett County Public Schools.

By comparison, in 2009, Atlanta Public Schools (APS) was a winner of the Council of Urban Boards of Education Award for Urban School Board Excellence (Bryant and Resnick 2011, 12). This award marked key focus on success and development in the classroom. On November 18, 2010, however, AdvancedED, a parent nonprofit organization for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), announced an investigation into Atlanta Public Schools (Torres 2010). The accreditation agency had the power to question and revoke the school system's accreditation, which could impact many high school seniors seeking scholarship money as well as the school system receiving federal funding (Torres 2011). The notification of the investigation came after a Fulton County Superior Court was set to hear a case brought to court by dissenting school board members concerning the appointment of a new chairman (Torres 2010).

After a formal investigation, on January 18, 2010, the APS was officially placed on probation until September 30, 2011 (Torres 2011). The decision was made due to the administrative leadership of the Atlanta Board of Education, the school board's professional interaction and decision-making abilities being deemed poor and potentially harmful to the classroom. In reference to poor leadership, Mark Elgart stated concerning an incident concerning the Georgia Bureau of Investigation into Atlanta Public Schools, "The focus that day should have been on helping parents, students and teachers. It's not a usual event for investigators to walk into schools, but they (the school board members) weren't talking about this, they spent eight hours arguing over who was chair of the board" (Torres 2011). By September 30, 2011, the board would have needed to show significant improvement on six recommendations offered by the SACS in order to maintain accreditation (Torres 2011).

These two polar examples further exemplify the problem and question posed earlier in this analysis: Why do some school systems fail while others succeed? From these examples, this analysis argues that some school systems fail or succeed based on the leadership of the school system's board of education. In the APS example, the school system has seen probationary discipline from SACS because the Atlanta Board of Education was not leading in an appropriate manner. In the extreme opposite case, however, there is apparent success in the school system of Gwinnett County Public Schools. When looking deeper into the root cause of this success, it is apparent that, among other factors, there is a strong school board leading the vision and actions toward success. These examples initially support the argument of this analysis that the reason some school systems are failing while others are succeeding is due to the leadership characteristics of the school system's board of education.

What are school boards? Why are they important? A school board is made up of elected leaders of a school system whose mission is to set the vision, goals, and direction of the school system and insure that these goals are implemented (Bryant and Resnick 2011). Michael A. Resnick and Anne L. Bryant state in their article, *School Boards: Why America Needs Them*, that "[l]ocal school boards are charged with ensuring that broader state and federal education requirements are met while translating local values and priorities into policies to meet the goals and aspirations of parents, tax payers, and local businesses" (Bryant and Resnick 2011, 11). They continue by stating school board's importance: "School boards give parents a mechanism for engaging in decisions that directly affect their children" (Bryant and Resnick 2011, 13). Furthermore, school boards are important because they provide transparency, give all voices an opportunity to be heard, and decide the best ways to distribute services (Hess 2011).

As discussed in the Leadership and Ethics in Public Service course, there are differences between leadership and management in an organization. School boards represent the leadership of a public school system, as they set the goals and expectations for managers, or administrators of the school system. In his book, *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management*, John Kotter states that leadership's role in creating an agenda for the organization is "developing a vision of the future, often the distant future, and strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision" (Kotter 1990, 3). Conversely, Kotter discusses that management's role in creating an agenda is "establishing detailed steps and timetables for achieving needed results, and then allocating the resources necessary to make that happen" (Kotter 1990, 3). Kotter discusses that leadership plays the role of "energizing people and to overcome major political, bureaucratic, and resource barriers to change by satisfying very basic, but often unfulfilled, human needs" (Kotter 1990, 3). This understanding that management and organizations succeed because of the strong leadership that guides and inspires the success of the organization relates directly to the principle of public administration: effectiveness. This is why this analysis argues that school boards must be effective in their leadership if school systems are to succeed.

If school boards are as important as these authors state, and if the presence of effective leadership is the proposed argument in solving the problem posed in this case, then something is missing from practical use: a tool, or a standard, to measure school board effectiveness. In addition to supporting the argument presented, this analysis will, in the process, create a measurement tool, through the means of a literature review, to examine school board effectiveness. This tool will consist of the trends of effective school board leadership, as noted in the literature, and will be tested through a comparison of leadership dimensions of the school

boards of Atlanta Public Schools and Gwinnett County Public Schools. If this tool is accurate in compiling significant leadership dimensions of these school boards, then these leadership dimensions should be found as part of Gwinnett County's Board of Education, and should not be found in the case of the Atlanta Board of Education. Perhaps this tool can be used to study the effectiveness and success of other school boards in the future.

The sections that follow will begin with the literature review focusing on the essential dimensions for the leadership of a school board. After discussing these dimensions, a methodology section will explain why this analysis is a comparative case study of Gwinnett County and the Atlanta Public Schools based on the leadership dimensions found in the literature review. The findings section will attempt to compare the policies and actions of each school board on leadership dimensions. The analysis concludes with some discoveries for managing successful school systems or boards.

Literature Review

There is a great deal of literature on leadership in public administration, particularly in public school systems, but the literature to determine what leadership dimensions of a school board lead to a successful school system is sparse. In the current literature, however, there exist certain dimensions that are mentioned often. These seven dimensions focus on the following: setting clear and concise goals, community engagement, sound financial management, human resources, the professional development of educators, student achievement, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. The seven dimensions are further elaborated on below.

Setting Clear and Concise Goals

One feature, or attribute, of a successful school board that is found in the literature is the attribute of being proficient in creating and communicating clear goals for the school system, the

finances, student achievement, the superintendant, and the overall direction of the school board itself. Perhaps as important as setting the goals is how the school board determines what goals to set. In the article *Finding the School Board's Philosophy: A Role Following Model*, Raymond Taylor describes how a Maine school board met and was introduced to various arguments on fifteen dichotomies of educational philosophy (Taylor 1980). For example, they heard the arguments for whether schools should stress individualism or teach social cooperation. Taylor states, "The final product was a comprehensive statement of philosophy which, in turn, became the spring board for revised instructional goals" (Taylor 1980, 206). Taylor argues that it is important for school board members to determine their individual philosophies on education, even if they disagree with other school board members, because setting clear goals should be centered on certain ideas.

In *Serving on your Local School Board: A Foundation for Success* by the Washington State School Directors' Association, the guide presents many roles and responsibilities for the local school board while giving advice on how to achieve their goals. The guide states that setting goals in the area of student achievement is non-negotiable and will lead the school system toward being successful (Washington State School Directors Association 2011). Additionally, in the area of finance, the earlier published guide *Serving on Your Local School Board: A Guide to Effective Leadership*, the Washington State School Directors Association discusses how it is the role and responsibility of the school board to set the vision and goals for the school system before the superintendant presents a proposed budget (Washington State School Directors Association 2009). In either case, the goals of the school board are an important step in leading the school system to success rather than simply responding to failures.

In his research titled *A Study of School Boards and their Implementation of Continuous Improvement Practices*, Jay Marino looks into effective school board leadership to determine if the school boards are using continual improvement practices. He determines that, as part of the goal setting process for school boards, benchmarking can be beneficial. He states that “[s]chool boards can benefit from observing, reading, and learning about effective board practices around the nation” (Marino 2011, 28). Benchmarking is important in goal setting because continual improvement should be the goal of effective school boards, especially those that are leading successful school systems.

Community Engagement

Among the most frequent factors mentioned in the literature of high quality, successful school boards is the idea of community engagement. Community engagement is a sense that the entire community, not just teachers or school staff, has a responsibility to educate students (Washington State School Directors' Association 2009). The school board plays an important role in collaborating with families, businesses, social service agencies, and community colleges when dealing with student achievement (Washington State School Directors' Association 2009). This vital role of community engagement is a partnership between key figures such as superintendents, principals, and school boards. Gene Maeroff states in the article *School Boards in America* that “[m]embers of school boards ... have an edge in engaging their friends and neighbors on behalf of the public school simply because they are part of the local community ...” (Maeroff 2011, 33). The edge is that they have the opportunity to interact with their communities throughout the time that administrators are implementing the goals and the directions of the school boards.

In his aforementioned study, Jay Marino also seeks to examine how school board presidents utilize continuous improvement practices. His aim is very relevant to this analysis because he states that “effective school boards can influence student achievement positively” (Marino 2011, 29). This statement alone supports the argument of this study that some school systems fail or succeed based on the effective leadership of the school system’s school board, but Marino continues and connects continual improvement to effective school boards and leadership. He states, “Board members cannot stand on the sidewalk watching the continuous improvement parade pass them by. The board must lead the parade” (Marino 2011, 29). Part of this continuous improvement is seeking stakeholder (community) data to determine the effectiveness of the school board. In support of his argument, Marino states that “By implementing systems to engage the community in goal setting, board presidents can improve strategic planning” (Marino 2011, 29).

Marino discusses how community engagement can lead to an effective school board and thus improve student achievement. On the other hand, Fredrick Hess, in his article *Weighing the case for School Board*, discusses that the lack of voter attention makes holding school boards accountable very difficult. He is essentially saying that the lack of community engagement can lead to school board corruption or failure (Hess 2011). This point will be made again later in this analysis when discussing transparency and accountability of school boards as important factors for their success. However, concerning community engagement, according to Hess, “... 63% of adults, and 50% of parents, say they can’t name their local superintendant and that 62% of adults, and 48% of parents, couldn’t name one member of their local school board” (Hess 2011, 16). Hess continues to explain that most people are not active or concerned with school affairs (Hess 2011). This problem has two groups to blame: the community and the school board. To the

points of Marino and Hess, however, if community engagement is not present, then achievement and effectiveness of the school board is also not present.

Financial Management

Not only does the literature discuss community engagement's important role in creating an effective school board, but it also discusses the importance of sound financial management by a school board. This is an important discussion both in the realm of public school boards and in public administration as a whole. As economy is a key principle of public administration, understanding the economy of the public organization is a true key to the success of that organization, and this is true for a board of education. A guide created by the Washington State School Directors' Association, with the purpose of providing the "basis for successful school board governance," lays out the roles and responsibilities of financial management:

The school board establishes goals and priorities that provide a framework for the budget. The superintendent works with other staff members to draft a budget that meets board objectives, follows laws and regulations, and stays within available district financial resources. The board approves the budget after a public hearing, and the superintendent is responsible for operating within its limits and for seeking board approval of expenditures. State law requires that the superintendent presents a budget status report at each regular monthly meeting of the board (Washington State School Directors' Association 2011, 24).

This brief snapshot of the roles and responsibilities of financial management of school boards shows that, although it is the superintendent's role to draft and implement the budget, it is the school board's responsibility to establish the goals and priorities, approve the budget, and then hold the superintendent accountable for the implementation of the budget (Washington State School Directors' Association 2011).

In *School Boards in America*, Gene Maeroff discusses some obstacles that can face school boards as they approve budgets and set goals. Maeroff recognizes that these obstacles are often insurmountable and constricting. He says, “Money is the lifeblood of education, and school boards, like landlords handcuffed by rent control, have few options as cost mounts” (Maeroff 2011, 34). Some of these obstacles include dealing with collective bargaining rights of teachers, setting aside money for very expensive special education programs, and working with the cost of transportation and special placement of children with disabilities (Maeroff 2011). How a school board deals with these financial obstacles will determine if the school district is able to have the resources necessary to succeed.

As discussed in the course on Governmental Relations and additionally in Public Service Budgeting, an essential role of the school board is to manage the financial relationship with the state and local governments (Shock 2011). Property taxes and special option sales taxes collected are the essential revenues funding the school system and are initially collected via the local government (Shock 2011). According to *Public Budgeting Systems* by Robert Lee Jr., Ronald Johnson, and Philip Joyce, the local sources of revenue only account for 44 percent of funding (Lee, Johnson, and Joyce 2008, 596). The additional 56 percent is funded through federal and state support and is distributed through various formulas based on population and equity. The distribution of funds puts the school boards at the mercy of the state decision-making (Lee, Johnson, and Joyce 2008, 596). As aforementioned, managing the relationship with other government entities is an obstacle that school boards must overcome to lead a successful school system.

The pressure of a national recession plays similarly true on local economies and school districts. The above obstacles and pressures of recession force effective school boards to often

cut expenditures and yet continue to reach the goals of student achievement. Additionally, school boards may react by making decisions to sell bonds or invest bond proceeds, adopt policies on investments, or approve insurance programs (Washington State School Directors' Association 2009). Using these tools to manage the financial health of the school district will determine if the school system can continue to meet its student achievement goals. If it cannot meet the student achievement goals either because students do not have resources or if financial fraud or hardships caused by financial mismanagement of the school board occur, then the school board has not been effective.

Human Resources

Hayes Mizzell connects student achievement and effective school systems to a focus on human resources. The focus on individuals in an organization as it pertains to social equity, pay, benefits, and other motivators is referred to as human resources. The focus here is to make sure that the organization cares for employees with equity. Equity is essential, as a principle of public administration, in all organizations because it levels the playing field and brings justice and fairness to the organization's business functions. Mizzell states that "[t]he people who teach children, lead schools, and administer school systems will ultimately determine how effective all children learn" (Mizzell 2011, 21). If this is true then one of the most important aspects of an effective school board is the focus on those individuals, with equity, so that they will implement the mission, goals, and directions of the school system.

In Frederick Hess's discussion on frailties of school board, he points out that teachers' unions play a large role in the special interest groups lobbying school boards. Hess argues from the view that an effective school board is one that acts ethically in the dealings with teacher unions (Hess 2011). He continues by stating that when unions back school board candidates, the

candidate wins a majority of school board elections. Hess connects that, when school boards govern the school system and additionally oversee contract negotiations, there could potentially be a failure to challenge union prerogatives and problematic personnel practices (Hess 2011).

Fred J. Abbate looks at a school board's dealings with unions from a slightly different perspective in his article *Education Leadership in a Culture of Compliance*. In his work, Abbate argues that, in large organizations such as school boards, there are issues and clients that must be addressed simply as a fact of life; among these issues are the management of union contracts and employee relationships (Abbate 2011). The determinant of success is not the actual dealings with these issues, but rather the mindset taken when addressing them. According to Abbate, "The lessons we learn from the best leaders in the most admired companies ... is that these sometimes contradictory stakeholder interests are usually seen as opportunities to do something valuable for the organization, to begin a new relationship or cement an existing one" (Abbate 2011, 36). Combining the thoughts of these two authors, Hess and Abbate, an effective school board leadership is composed, in part, of a focus on human resources and, more specifically, on how effectively a school board addresses its interaction in collective bargaining hearings and with unions as a whole. Effectiveness can be measured here in terms of ethical behavior and positive holistic results.

Professional Development of Educators

In an extension of the focus on human resources, literature also discusses how effective school board leadership focuses on the professional development of teachers. Mizzell discusses professional development at length in his article *School Boards should focus on Learning for All*. He states that "the board's role is to set student learning goals at each level and to develop policies and provide resources that enable educators to meet the goals" (Mizzell 2011, 23). These

resources, either formal continual education seminars or classroom management training, are known as professional development and are connected to the leadership factor of a focus on human resources. Training not only furthers student achievement, but it can also be used as a motivator, like pay and benefits.

Furthermore, Mizzell continues his discussion by connecting professional development to effective school board leadership. In his opinion, “Professional development is a limited resource that some school systems use well but others either waste or use ineffectively. ...if school boards are thoughtful and intentional in reforming professional development, they can demonstrate they are serious about learning for all” (Mizzell 2011, 23). Additionally, Gene Maeroff, in *School Boards in America*, says the following: “Professional development is but one area in which school boards, if they have not bargained away their ability, can set policies that make a difference” (Maeroff 2011, 33). Similarly to the focus on human resources, a focus on professional development allows the school board to more effectively reach the goals of student achievement. This is why effective school boards focus on innovative ways to fund the continual development of their educators.

Student Achievement

In this discussion of literature and as an overarching theme of this study, student achievement has been mentioned as the goal of a successful school system, beginning with the direction of a school board. The literature does not just hint at this idea, but it specifically addresses the idea that student achievement is a fundamental role and responsibility. The guide *Serving on Your Local School Board: A Foundation for Success* by Washington State School Directors' Association states that one of the roles of a school board is to “set and communicate high expectations for student learning with clear goals and plans for meeting those expectations

...” (Washington State School Directors' Association 2011, 15). It continues by stating: “This requires strong and effective leadership at the helm of every school district, with school directors working at the strategic level and administrators working at the operational level. Together, school directors and superintendents work as a governance team to ensure continuous improvement of student achievement” (Washington State School Directors' Association 2011, 15). The statements here are essential to the focus of student achievement being part of an effective school board. The statement by the Washington State School Directors' Association not only inserts this focus into the roles of a school board, but also it connects its achievement to school system leadership.

Anne L. Bryant and Michael A. Resnick discuss why America still needs the leadership of school boards in their article *School Boards; Why American Education Needs Them*. They give the following scenario to explain why leadership from the school board is essential in the case of student achievement:

Beyond good decision making, do school boards perform special leadership functions that make a difference in raising student achievement? Evidence from Iowa suggests that they do.

Since 1999, the Iowa Lighthouse Study has interviewed and surveyed hundreds of school district leaders and school board members in an effort to answer the question. Examined were districts that were comparable in socioeconomic makeup and finances but which had vastly different student achievement. One of the study's key findings was that low-performing school districts had a self fulfilling prophecy of low expectations by school staff and students. By contrast, high-performing school districts had climates of success specifically established by the board through expectations of students and staff, including the accountability and resources provided by the by the board and the community support that that board garnered for the schools (Bryant and Resnick 2011, 12-13).

This snapshot of the Iowa Lighthouse Study shows a key connection between the focus on student achievement by school boards and school system success. The way the school board focuses on student achievement is linked to the focus on goal setting in that the key responsibility, according to *Serving on your Local School Board: A Foundation for Success*, is setting a clear vision and non-negotiable goals for the school system to follow (Washington State School Directors' Association 2009).

A Commitment to Transparency and Accountability

A final feature of a successful school board, as found in the literature, is transparency, coupled with accountability. These two features go hand in hand, with one leading to another in almost all cases. In the case of education, transparency means that information is open for the public knowledge and that decisions are not made behind closed doors without public input. Accountability means that consequences are assigned both positively and negatively to one's actions. In the literature reviewed for this study, the authors all seem to be on the same page about these features being important to achieve the goals of the school system. Additionally, the authors seem to share the view that school boards not only need to be transparent with information and be held accountable for student achievement or school system success but also that school boards should hold teachers and administrators accountable for their successes or failures and for their level of transparency.

Looking into the literature of one author, Frederick Hess discusses in *Weighing the Case for School Boards* that one major critique of school boards (one that could lead to the failure of the school system) is that the lack of voter attention makes holding school board members accountable for their decisions very difficult (Hess 2011). Indeed, being an elected official does come with an embedded price of accountability, meaning that in every election cycle a school

board member must defend his or her right to continue on the school board. However, what Hess is saying is that if voters do not pay close attention to the works of the school board, then voters may not accurately hold these public officials accountable. Hess continues by stating that school boards provide transparency (Hess 2011). He discusses that school boards are comprised of elected officials, and they are well suited to provide this transparency because, as Hess implies, they may feel the pressure of being held accountable for their actions. This pressure thus leads them to make good decisions in the open. School boards being held accountable and transparent are great attributes that will lead to a successful school system.

The culmination of the literature review shows that many factors lead to a successful, high performing school system and that the school board plays a key role in achieving this success. The literature also shows that school boards have effective leadership dimensions or focuses that make them successful or, if not intentionally followed, can lead to failure. Table 1, *A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership*, serves as a mechanism to measure the success of a school board through measuring against effective leadership dimensions. Table 1, *A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership*, is an original creation of this analysis and is supported as a culmination of the authors of the literature review.

Methodology

Case Study

This study can be described as an exploratory case study and a critical incident case study. Bent Flyvbjerg's paper, *Case Study*, uses Merriam-Webster's definition of a case study as "an intensive analysis of an individual unit stressing developmental factors in relation to environment" (Flyvbjerg 2011, 301). Flyvbjerg stresses that a key element of this definition is that a case study must be intensive and thus focused on the richness, completeness, and depth of

a subject (Flyvbjerg 2011). Within the study's depth, the case study is still focused on an individual unit. He states that a case study must not be underestimated, because it can indeed provide reliable information to the broader context, but by itself it is simply an analysis of an individual unit (Flyvbjerg 2011). Flyvbjerg does make it clear that when Merriam-Webster says, "relation to the environment," the definition addresses that the analysis should sit in a relevant context. In his words, "The boundaries for the individual unit of study decides what gets to count as case and what becomes context to the case" (Flyvbjerg 2011, 301). Similarly, in the book *Research Methods for Public Administrators* used in the Research Methods and Computer Applications course, O'Sullivan, Rassel, and Berner (2008, 40) state that case studies "examine in some depth persons, decisions, programs, or other entities that have unique characteristics of interest."

This study fits Flyvbjerg's definition and explanation perfectly because it is an intensive analysis, an in-depth study, of an individual unit: school board leadership. The aim of this study is to create a benchmarking tool that can be used to provide reliable information in the broader context of why some schools succeed while others fail; however, it does so with a primary focus on determining school board success factors and effective leadership dimensions. This study is qualitative in nature, because qualitative analysis works best to describe and understand the overarching meaning of school board leadership and school system success. Just as important, choosing to compare Gwinnett County Public Schools and Atlanta Public Schools is an important element to this study of school board leadership being a case study. Additionally, these two school systems show a "relationship to the environment" and are relevant in the context of Georgia's public education system (Flyvbjerg 2011, 301). Thus to analyze school board leadership, it must be done within this relevant environment. Because the aim is not to solve the

overarching themes of school system failures but to explore one factor that may lead to solving that problem, this qualitative analytical case study fits well to Flyvbjerg's analysis of a case study.

More specifically, there are different types of case studies. According to O'Sullivan, Rassel, and Berner (2008, 42), an exploratory case study "serves as a basis for establishing new research questions, new hypothesis, and a continuing research agenda." That is an objective of this analysis: to study school board leadership dimensions in hopes to lead research toward a solution to the issue of failing schools. As stated earlier, perhaps Table 1, the benchmarking tool, can be used to study the effectiveness and success of other school boards in the future.

Additionally, another type of case study is a critical incident case study. It is described by Colorado State University as a case study that "examine[s] one or more sites for either the purpose of examining a situation of unique interest with little to no interest in generalizability, or to call into question or challenge a highly generalized or universal assertion. This method is useful for answering cause and effect questions" (Colorado State University 2011). The analysis fits within this definition because it examines multiple sites, Gwinnett County Public Schools and Atlanta Public Schools' boards, with the purpose of examining the success or failure of a school system with an analysis of effective leadership dimensions of the school boards.

Comparative Analysis

The literature concerning school boards, their leadership, and the dimensions that lead to their success and failures does exist. However, the aim of this project is to combine the literature which highlights leadership dimensions of the school board into a measurement tool that can practically be used as a benchmark for examining school boards and their success. Through this review, *A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership* has been crafted and

presented in Table 1. This tool can be used by school boards to measure their effective leadership and potential success. In creating this tool, a plethora of literature was used to find key characteristics and factors present in successful school boards. These dimensions and characteristics focus on the following: setting clear and concise goals, community engagement, sound financial management, human resources, professional development of educators, student achievement, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. Table 1 is organized in a manner so that school boards can use the effective leadership dimensions and their definitions to benchmark their performance by answering questions that judge any school board's participation in the leadership dimension.

Taking a further step into understanding school board leadership and examining the argument of this analysis, this study will next take a further look into Gwinnett County's Board of Education and Atlanta's Board of Education. The purpose of taking this closer look into the cases of the Gwinnett and the Atlanta boards is to examine the practical credibility of the benchmarking tool gleaned from the literature in solving the issue: Why do some school systems fail while others succeed? Thus this analysis will determine if factors in Table 1 are present in a successful school system's board, Gwinnett County Board of Education, and are absent from a poor performing school system's board, Atlanta Board of Education.

Looking into Gwinnett County Board of Education and Atlanta Board of Education, the study will find data from public records. These public records can be found primarily through the school systems' websites. A website is the most effective and efficient method to give information to the public or to be transparent with the decisions of the school board. It is also the most effective and efficient way for a researcher to examine the decisions of a school board. In

cases that information cannot be found, a request for these records will be submitted to the school system.

Findings

This section of the analysis will compare the Gwinnett County Board of Education and the Atlanta Board of Education based on the leadership dimensions found in the literature review and compiled in *A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership*. Using the respective school system's website, the analysis will attempt to locate school board policies and actions that can be compared to each of the seven leadership dimensions.

Setting Clear and Concise Goals

Both Gwinnett County and Atlanta's school boards have policies in place that guide the creation of a vision, mission, and goals for their respective school system. It is very apparent, however, that Gwinnet County's school board has done a much more proficient job in clearly defining the goals, as well as making the goals measurable, clear, and visible to the public. The mission, vision, and goals for the two school systems as mentioned in their school board policies are as follows:

Gwinnett County Public Schools' Mission Statement:

The mission of Gwinnett County Public Schools is to pursue excellence in academic knowledge, skills, and behavior for each student, resulting in measured improvement against local, national, and world-class standards (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

Atlanta Public Schools' Mission Statement:

The mission of the school district is to be accountable for focusing talents and resources to ensure that APS students are successful in school and life (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

Gwinnett County Public Schools' Vision:

Gwinnett County Public Schools will become a system of world-class schools where students acquire the knowledge and skills to be successful as they continue their education at the postsecondary level and/or enter the workforce (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

Atlanta Public School's Vision:

The vision of the Atlanta Board of Education is that the Atlanta Public Schools will be one of the nation's top performing urban school districts in which all students will become lifelong learners equipped with the appropriate skills and competencies to be contributing members of society (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

Gwinnett County Public Schools' Goals:

Goal 1: Gwinnett County Public Schools will ensure a world-class education for all students by focusing on teaching and learning the Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) curriculum.

Goal 2: Gwinnett County Public Schools will ensure a safe, secure, and orderly environment for all.

Goal 3: Gwinnett County Public Schools will optimize student achievement through responsible stewardship of its financial resources and the proactive pursuit of all resources necessary to meet current and future demands.

Goal 4: Gwinnett County Public Schools will recruit, employ, develop, and retain a workforce that achieves the mission and goals of the organization.

Goal 5: Gwinnett County Public Schools will meet the continuing and changing demand for essential information through technological systems and processes that support effective performance and desired results.

Goal 6: Gwinnett County Public Schools will provide and manage the system's facilities and operations in an exemplary manner as determined by programmatic needs and best management practices.

Goal 7: Gwinnett County Public Schools will apply continuous quality improvement strategies and principles as the way the organization does business (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

Atlanta Public Schools' Goals:

The superintendent shall present annually to the board goals and objectives designed to achieve the board's vision and mission. The board's work shall be in support of its goals and priorities which shall be established annually (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

The distinct difference between the two sets of goals is that Gwinnett County's board's goals are clear, concise, and consistent year to year. Atlanta board's goals are not actually listed on the website and are changed yearly based on the direction of the superintendent. It would seem that Gwinnett County Schools are moving in unison under the leadership and direction of the school board, while Atlanta Public Schools are moving in support of the goals and leadership established by the superintendant.

In addition to the goals established to meet the mission of the school system, Gwinnett County Board of Education is also driven by the *Core Beliefs of the Board of Education* and *Commitments of the Board of Education* (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011). Both of these documents are listed in the Appendix section of this analysis. Gwinnett has also published the document *Strategic Direction*, which lists the Strategic Priorities for 2010-2020 and acts as a communication document to focus the school system in a single direction concerning ten strategic areas of focus (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2010). The existence and focus of this document separates Gwinnett County Board of Education from the Atlanta Board of Education in terms of proficiency in setting clear and concise goals. It is apparent from the outside

perspective that Gwinnett is moving in a clear direction guided by the documents and the core beliefs of the school board. This is not as evident when looking at the Atlanta's school board.

Community Engagement

Community engagement, as defined by the literature review, is the involvement of all the stakeholders (parents, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and nonprofits) into the process of public education through various means with the goal of furthering the educational achievements of students. Both school systems are involved in various programs that connect them to their respected communities. According to their website, Gwinnett County Public Schools work specifically with the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center and the organization Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful by way of various volunteer events (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011). Additionally, as part of the “Public Image and Community Pride” component of the Strategic Priorities for 2010–2020, the school board, along with the superintendant, states the following about their view on community engagement:

The school system will be a source of community pride and a major factor in the economic vitality of the county. The public will regard Gwinnett County Public Schools as the school system of choice, worthy of support and confidence. The district will attract new residents and employers, as well as new employees, with its reputation as a system of world-class schools. The school system will earn the trust of taxpayers through effective management of its financial, physical, and human resources. Our schools belong to the public. Therefore, the entire community has a stake in our success and will be supportive of our schools and the district. Good schools build good communities, and good communities sustain good schools. Gwinnett schools will benefit from a wide variety of business and community-based partnerships. In turn, our employees and students will contribute to the county's quality of life through their involvement in the community (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2010).

Atlanta Public Schools participate in community engagement activities as well. The system is in a partnership with General Electric to engage students in mathematics and science (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011). As does Gwinnett County, Atlanta Public Schools also participate in community schools. In the school board policy on “School-Community Programs,” the school board describes the goals and expectations of the community school as follows:

The Board recognizes that the role of a community school is broadly defined to encompass the needs of the total community. ... Goals and expectations of the community school include the following:

1. As a centrally located facility, the community school provides an existing and common meeting ground where living and learning activities may join forces. It is a means for developing communication among neighbors, school personnel, and civic, business, and lay leaders enabling them to broaden their educational objectives, improve their neighborhoods, and cooperatively tackle community problems. The community school becomes the hub and center of community activities for all ages.
2. To foster cooperative relationships with governmental and service agencies.
3. To develop an Advisory Council to serve as a clearinghouse for processing school and school-related community issues and problems.
4. To initiate and coordinate special events to improve community relationships, frequently in cooperation with volunteer and civic organizations.
5. Through community outreach, to develop and foster relationships with business and industry (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

In terms of community engagement, the two school boards seem to at least have a focus on engaging the different stakeholders in the community. As with setting clear goals, however, Gwinnett’s board presents its direction more clearly than does Atlanta’s board. The Strategic Priorities for 2010-2020 plays a key role in communicating the goals of Gwinnett’s board.

Financial Management

In terms of financial management, the Gwinnett County Board of Education and Atlanta Board of Education have two different approaches. Gwinnet County's board takes a hands-on approach to financial management through taking on decision-making responsibilities and ensuring efficient and effective use of revenue. The policy on "Fiscal Management Goals" of the Gwinnett County School Board describes the management goals of the school board:

As trustee of local, state, and federal funds allocated for use in public education; the Board will be vigilant in fulfilling its responsibility to see that these funds are used wisely for achievement of the purposes to which they are allocated. The quality of teaching and learning that takes place in Gwinnett County Public Schools is directly dependent on the funding provided and the effective, efficient management of those funds. It follows that achievement of the district's goals can be facilitated through excellent fiscal management. Further, the Board recognizes the important trust it has been given in managing a large amount of public resources.

Board fiscal operation and management will ensure that education remains central and that fiscal matters are ancillary and contribute to the educational program (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

Atlanta's board takes a different approach to financial management. In a hands-off approach, the board leaves many key financial decisions to the local schools and to the partnership between the principals and the superintendent. In the policies on "Planning, Programming, Budgeting System, and Expenditure of Funds" the Atlanta board describes the management direction as follows:

In order to encourage creativity and initiative by all staff members in the delivery of effective services to students, the Atlanta Board of Education affirms the concept that the decisions that affect the operation of local schools should be made at the school level to the maximum extent permitted by Board policies.

It is the goal of the Atlanta Board of Education to use available funds in a manner that will assure the maximum educational return for each dollar spent. The allocation of budget funds to individual schools places a part of the responsibility for achieving this goal on school principals and other members of local school staffs. Freedom to select and request instructional materials carries with it a responsibility for wise selection and prudent management. This calls for educational and business judgment directed toward the achievement of maximum instructional improvement within the resources available (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

In the case of Gwinnett County Public Schools, the school board plays a bigger role in the overall financial management than does the Atlanta Board of Education. In a comparison to *A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership*, it would seem that the Gwinnett County Board of Education would be more successful in its leadership on fiscal responsibility because it has more control over the management of the funds and the financial relationship of key stakeholders. This point is not given to imply that more control in areas is better, but in the case of financial management, control is seen as a benefit to the school board.

Human Resources

A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership defines an effective focus on human resources as how a school board addresses its interaction in collective bargaining hearings and with unions. Additionally, it is a focus on excellent best practices to recruit and retain high quality staff. Concerning the focus on recruiting and retaining high quality staff, both school boards have policies in place to do this well. However, concerning the focus on proactively and positively addressing collective bargaining and union behavior, the Atlanta board

has policies in place as to do this well, whereas Gwinnett County board does not. Atlanta board's policy on "Professional Organizations" is as follows:

Every employee of the Atlanta Board of Education shall have the right to freely organize and to join and participate in any professional association or labor organization to the end of improving salaries, hours, and working conditions.

As a duly-elected body exercising governmental power under the laws of the State of Georgia, the Board will not discriminate against any employee with respect to wages, hours, or any terms or conditions of employment because of participation in any professional association or labor organization or because of the institution of any grievance, complaint, or proceeding.

The Board will not discourage or deprive any employee of the enjoyment of any rights acknowledged by this policy (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

Because of this proactive measure, the Atlanta board is well set-up to deal with the process of collective bargaining and other union activities. It would do well for Gwinnett County's board to address this issue with a formal policy.

Professional Development of Educators

A focus on professional development of educators is the process of school boards taking the time and resources to continuously improve and broaden the skills and knowledge of their educators through continual education courses, leadership conferences, and other means of development. In this comparison, both school boards have policies in place to guide them in providing professional development to educators; however, the Gwinnett County board's policy is driven more by the core beliefs of the school board, whereas the Atlanta board's policy states more of the direction and responsibilities of the superintendent. Gwinnett County Public Schools are guided by the school board policy on "Staff Development" which states:

The Gwinnett County Board of Education sets forth in policy its commitment to provide all personnel with education and training opportunities that will enable

them to perform their duties consistently to high standards. This policy is in alignment with the Board's Core Beliefs and Commitments and acknowledges the Board's responsibility to build capacity among all employees in this system of world-class schools. The policy supports the establishment of a performance culture in the organization by ensuring that all employees have the requisite knowledge, skills, and expertise to achieve the desired results, as measured against local, national, and world-class standards. Consistent with this performance culture, all personnel shall participate annually in a minimum of 20 hours of approved staff development that aligns with the district's vision, mission, goals, and initiatives. Evidence of completion, implementation, and results of the required staff development will be incorporated into each employee's annual evaluation.

The CEO/Superintendent shall allocate appropriate resources to assure this policy is implemented. To execute this policy, the Staff Development Department and the Quality-Plus Leader Academy, guided by Executive Cabinet and the appropriate central office and local school staff, will develop and implement a comprehensive staff development plan that addresses the educational and training needs of all staff. This comprehensive staff development plan will include programs and activities in the areas of leadership development, teacher development, and support staff development (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

Atlanta Public Schools are guided by the school board policy on “Professional Learning Opportunities” which states:

A program of staff development shall be implemented to provide in-service training opportunities for the continuous professional, personal, and technical development of all staff in the Atlanta Public Schools.

To this end, the Superintendent shall develop and implement a Comprehensive Staff Development Plan that shall include the following:

1. Administrative procedures for reporting all staff development activities for personnel in the plan.
2. Activities that address instructional effectiveness and the assessed needs of school personnel.
3. Procedures for the implementation of the approved plan.

The Superintendent shall appoint a Staff Development Advisory Committee. Membership on the committee shall be representative of the staff to be served by staff development activities. The function of the committee will be to advise and assist in the assessment of needs, the determination of priorities, the content of activities, the evaluation of the program, and the modification of plans (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

In both cases, there are clear policies and the methods to achieve professional development for educators. The opinion of this analysis is that because the policy of Gwinnett County's board is foremost guided by the core beliefs and commitments of the school board, the policy will be more consistent. Additionally, the policy shows not only what the school board believes about the focus but also why it believes this should be a focus of leadership.

Student Achievement

A focus on student achievement is defined as a culmination of setting high learning standards, giving clear direction and expectations, and providing the resources available for students to achieve and exceed the standards and goals set by the school system. With this focus, both Gwinnett County's board and Atlanta's board have similar goals, although they go about communicating and setting forth their goals differently. In both cases, the respective school boards approach their focus to student achievement through what Gwinnett County calls Strategic Priorities for 2010–2020 and what the Atlanta website calls Strategic Initiatives. Gwinnett County Schools' focus is also guided by the policy on "Board's Theory of Action for Change to Improve Student" (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011). In respect to Gwinnett

County, the Strategic Priorities for 2010–2020 addresses the focus through a clear overarching statement and goal. This statement on student achievement is as follows:

As engaged learners, our students will reach their full learning potential. They will be critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and effective communicators. What they experience as Gwinnett students will encourage their growth as curious, analytical, imaginative, and adaptable learners. They will take responsibility for their own learning, achievement, and behavior, making the most of opportunities in Gwinnett schools. Students will demonstrate high levels of character, taking pride in their school, community, and country. They will understand that America's greatness is built upon three things... our form of government—a representative democracy; how we do business—our free-enterprise system; and how we educate our people—our system of public education. They will develop leadership and teamwork skills, preparing to be successful American citizens who function effectively in a global economy. Students will graduate with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to succeed in college, work, and life in the 21st century (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2010).

As aforementioned, in respect to Atlanta Public Schools, the focus on student achievement is shown through Strategic Initiatives. The focus on student achievement is also mentioned through the vision of the Atlanta school board. The difference in communicating the focus on student achievement is that there is an absence of an overarching goal or even statements concerning the initiatives, excluding for the vision of the school board. However, it is difficult to find specific initiatives such as Project GRAD, a strategic initiative of Atlanta Public Schools, on Gwinnett County's website. An explanation of Project GRAD is as follows:

Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) is a national school reform initiative first introduced in 1993 in Houston, Texas. Since 2000, Project GRAD has been the Atlanta Public Schools' signature program to improve student achievement. The program provides school- and community-based services to improve classroom instruction and cultivate a college-going mindset among

students. Project GRAD ensures a quality public school education for all students in economically disadvantaged communities so that high school graduation rates increase and graduates are prepared to enter and be successful in college (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

One additional Atlanta Public School initiative that focuses on student achievement is the Math and Science Initiative, which is a strategic partnership with General Electric to raise students' success in the areas of math and science (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011).

In perspective, it may benefit the Atlanta school board to guide their student achievement goals by an overarching, clear, and concise written direction as Gwinnett's school board has done. On the other hand, it may also benefit Gwinnett to more clearly communicate the initiatives in which it is actually participating to achieve its goals as they pertain to student achievement.

A Commitment to Transparency and Accountability

Transparency means that all information is open for public knowledge and that decisions are made with "open doors" and with input from the public. Accountability means that consequences, both positive and negative, are assigned to the decisions and actions of all members of leadership. With this commitment, both the Atlanta Board of Education and the Gwinnett County Board of Education have similar policies. Both operate by holding the school board accountable through ethics committees and codes. Gwinnett operates out of the school board policy on "School Board Code of Ethics" while the APS operates under the school board policy on "Advisory Committees" (Atlanta Public Schools, 2011; Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

Gwinnett County Board of Education has additional policies and procedures in place to hold not only the school board accountable but also the superintendent and school administrators

accountable. In the policy on “Academic Accountability,” the school board outlines the policy that led to the implementation of the Results-Based Evaluation System. This system leads to a set of reports that monitors schools performance based on the defined goals (Gwinnett County Schools, 2011). The policy on “Academic Accountability” states:

In concert with its Core Beliefs and Commitments, and in extension of its Theory of Action for Change to Improve Student Achievement (Policy BAA), the Gwinnett County Board of Education sets forth in policy its belief that Gwinnett County Public Schools must manage performance within flexible parameters that balance accountability with empowerment according to the needs and performance of individual schools. The school district has developed an accountability system for improving schools called the Results-Based Evaluation System (RBES). RBES fairly and systematically measures a school's progress, providing a process for clearly communicating expectations, and reviewing, monitoring, and evaluating school performance (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011)

Gwinnett holds this policy, as with many other policies, to the ambiguous yet honorable standard of world-class. A continuation of the school board policy on “Academic Accountability” states just that:

RBES Standards are based on world-class performance. "World-class" describes any product, service or organization that is judged by qualitative and quantitative measures as one of the best in its class, and that is acknowledged, accepted, admired, and emulated by customers, stakeholders, professional peers, and competitors alike. The academic components of RBES are derived from student achievement scores of schools in 25 large school districts that are among the highest performing and most highly regarded in the United States (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2011).

In terms of transparency, both school systems are seemingly committed to this leadership focus. Both school systems’ websites show policies, procedures, and notes from previous school

board meetings. In the opinion of this analysis, Gwinnett County Public Schools' website does give more information pertaining to past meetings and the direction of the board. The Atlanta Public Schools' website shows school board meeting agendas dating back to 2005, while Gwinnett County Public Schools' website shows school board meeting agendas dating back to 2000.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has discovered four key points. The first discovery is that the argument of this analysis, or that the reason some school systems are failing while others are succeeding is due to the leadership characteristics of the school system's board of education, is partially correct. There are indeed other factors that are important to the success of the school system. Superintendents play a key role in executing the leadership goals and directions of the school board, and principals act as line managers, directly impacting key results. The case however, was very clear in the literature and the example of Atlanta Public Schools being placed on accreditation probation that school board leadership is an element in determining the foundation of success or failure for a school system.

The second discovery is that there are key leadership dimensions that all school boards should implement in their jurisdictions. Through the literature review, seven key dimensions have been discovered. These seven dimensions focus on the following: setting clear and concise goals, community engagement, sound financial management, human resources, the professional development of educators, student achievement, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. There indeed may be more leadership dimensions that school boards should consider, but these are at least the foundational areas that should be the center of school board leadership.

In the process of comparing Gwinnett County Board of Education and the Atlanta Board of Education to the dimensions listed above, the third discovery was made. The difference between the two school systems and/or two school boards is not that one focused on the leadership dimensions listed in this analysis while the other did not, but rather that the Gwinnett County Board of Education had focused its leadership dimensions around one clear direction. It is very evident that Gwinnett County Public Schools are led by one mission, one vision, and very precise goals for every aspect of its school system. These clearly-stated goals and directions are present in most documents and are publicized to the community very well. This is not necessarily the case for the Atlanta school board. This analysis could not find clear goals for Atlanta Public Schools, and although a vision is present in writing, it does not seem to guide the school system like the Gwinnett County Public Schools' vision and mission does.

In addition, the goals and directions of the Gwinnett County Public Schools are also led very strongly by the board of education and are implemented in partnership by the superintendent, as compared to the case of Atlanta's public school system, where the superintendent is responsible for setting the goals and seemingly acts as the chair of the school board. This is not to say that the superintendent should not play a key role in the development of goals, but what is more important to the success of the school system is that the school board is moving in one clear direction, established by a key mission, vision, and goals that are centered on the success of the school system and its students.

The last discovery is that *A Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership* can indeed be used as a benchmarking tool to help school boards implement the right leadership dimensions. It would be the recommendation of this analysis that the tool be used to ensure that a school board is indeed centered on fundamental leadership dimensions. It is also the final

recommendation of this analysis that more research should be conducted on the importance of the school board setting clear and concise goals for a school system.

Table 1: Benchmarking Tool for Effective School Board Leadership

Effective School Board Leadership Dimensions		
Key Leadership Functions	Definition	Questions to Ponder
Setting Clear and Concise Goals	Setting clear goals is about having a clear, unified set of goals that are derived from a clear vision and mission statement. These goals help guide the actions of the school system.	Do we have a vision? Do we have a mission statement? Do we have clear and measurable goals for each aspect of our school system? Do we have action steps to reach each goal?
Community Engagement	Community engagement is involving all stakeholders (parents, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and nonprofits) into the process of public education with the goal of furthering the educational achievements of students.	Do our stakeholders know who we are? Do our stakeholders know our mission and goals? How can we reach those who are not engaged in our mission and goals? Can we do a better job at involving the engaged community in reaching our goals?
Financial Management	Sound financial management is dealing with financial obstacles in an effective manner in order to secure and sustain the resources needed to meet and further the goals of the school system (i.e. student achievement).	Do we have a budget? Long-term financial plan? Short-term financial plan? Do we carry too much debt? Is our financial management meeting the needs of our school system? Are we audited by an independent, third party for waste and fraud? Are we holding ourselves to upmost ethical decision making around financial management?
Human Resources	An effective focus on human resources is partially measured by the manner a school board addresses collective bargaining hearings and union participation. Additionally, it is a focus on excellent best practices as it pertains to recruiting and retaining a high quality staff.	Do our interactions with unions and collective bargaining make us better as an organization? Are we recruiting top, quality talent? Do we have a focused plan to retain our top talent through HR best practices?
Professional Development of Educators	Effective school systems allot time and resources to broadening the skills and knowledge of their educators through continual education courses, leadership conferences, and other means of development.	Do we actively provide opportunities for our educators to engage in professional development? Do we have a plan to develop our educators into the highest tier of talent in order to reach our goals?
Student Achievement	A focus on student achievement is a culmination of setting high learning standards, giving clear direction and expectations concerning these standards, and providing the resources needed for students to achieve and exceed the standards and goals set by the school system.	Do we have clear learning standards for our students? Are these standards high enough to challenge our students to do their best? Have we been clear in communicating our goals and directions concerning student achievement to administrators? Do our schools have the resources needed to achieve their goals and meet standards?
A commitment to Transparency and Accountability	Transparency means that all information is open for the public viewing and that decisions are made with “open doors” and with input from the public. Accountability means that consequences are assigned to the decisions and actions, both positively and negatively, of all members of leadership.	Are our stakeholders aware of our goals and actions? Were the stakeholders involved in making our goals and action steps to meet our goals? Are our finances audited by an independent, third party for transparency? Are there defined consequences for all internal stakeholders as it pertains to the failure to meet the expectations of the school system, including the school board?

Compiled from the literature reviewed in this Analysis

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Appendix A

Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools

Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools

Research has shown that there is no silver bullet, no single thing that schools can do to ensure high student performance. Rather, high performing schools tend to have the following nine characteristics:

- 1. Clear and Shared Focus** – Everybody knows where they are going and why. The focus is on achieving a shared vision, and all understand their role in achieving the vision. The focus and vision are developed from common beliefs and values, creating a consistent direction for all involved.
- 2. High Standards and Expectations for All Students** – Teachers and staff believe that all students can learn and meet high standards. While recognizing that some students must overcome significant barriers, these obstacles are not seen as insurmountable. Students are offered an ambitious and rigorous course of study.
- 3. Effective School Leadership** – Effective instructional and administrative leadership is required to implement change processes. Effective leaders proactively seek needed help. They nurture an instructional program and school culture conducive to learning and professional growth. Effective leaders have different styles and roles – teachers and other staff, including those in the district office, often have a leadership role.
- 4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication** – There is strong teamwork among teachers across all grades and with other staff. Everybody is involved and connected to each other, including parents and members of the community, to identify problems and work on solutions.
- 5. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with Standards** – The planned and actual curriculum are aligned with the essential academic learning requirements (EALRs). Research-based teaching strategies and materials are used. Staff understand the role of classroom and state assessments, what the assessments measure, and how student work is evaluated.
- 6. Frequent Monitoring of Learning and Teaching** – A steady cycle of different assessments identify students who need help. More support and instructional time is provided, either during the school day or outside normal school hours. Teaching is adjusted based on frequent monitoring of student progress and needs. Assessment results are used to focus and improve instructional programs.
- 7. Focused Professional Development** – A strong emphasis is placed on training staff in areas of most need. Feedback from learning and teaching focuses extensive and ongoing professional development. The support is also aligned with the school or district vision and objectives.
- 8. Supportive Learning Environment** – The school has a safe, civil, healthy and intellectually stimulating learning environment. Students feel respected and connected with the staff and are engaged in learning. Instruction is personalized and small learning environments increase student contact with teachers.
- 9. High Levels of Family and Community Involvement** – There is a sense that all have a responsibility to educate students, not just teachers and school staff. Families, businesses, social service agencies, and community colleges/universities all play a vital role in this effort.

– Office of the Superintendent
of Public Instruction
June 2007

Source: Washington State School Directors', Association. 2009. *Serving on your local school board: A guide to effective leadership*. Washington State School Directors' Association, 2009. Seattle, Washington.

Appendix B

Core Beliefs and Commitments of the Gwinnett County Board of Education

Core Beliefs of the Gwinnett County Board of Education

- Our core business is teaching and learning.
- All children can learn at or above grade level.
- All children should reach their learning potential.
- The school effect is important and has a profound impact on every child's life.
- A quality instructional program requires a rigorous curriculum, effective teaching, and ongoing assessment.
- All children should be taught in a safe and secure learning environment.

Commitments of the Gwinnett County Board of Education

- Gwinnett County Public Schools will give its core business, teaching and learning, priority over all other functions of the organization.
- All GCPS students will learn at or above grade level.
- All GCPS students will reach their learning potential.
- The school effect is important and Gwinnett County Public Schools will have a positive impact on every child's life.
- GCPS will have a quality instructional program that includes a rigorous curriculum, effective teaching, and ongoing assessment.
- All GCPS students will be taught in a safe and secure learning environment.

Source: Gwinnett County Public Schools. 2011.<http://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us> [Accessed October 17, 2011].

Appendix C

Strategic Priorities for 2010–2020

Introduction

Gwinnett County Public Schools is known to be a high-performing school district that provides a quality and effective education for every student. To sustain our record of success we must continuously review where we are and envision what the organization must be in the future if we are to be successful in educating and preparing our students for the demands of the 21st century. That is why we spent the past year-and-a-half asking ourselves and our stakeholders, “What should Gwinnett County Public Schools be like in the next decade?”

The *Strategic Priorities for 2010-2020* outline the qualities and characteristics our employees and stakeholders believe are desirable for 10 major components of the school district. Each component is either a direct responsibility of the district or can be influenced by the attitudes and actions of those within the organization. We believe that pursuing these attributes will move us closer to realizing our vision of being a system of world-class schools.

Our success depends upon the support of the people employed by the district and those served by it. The Strategic Priorities will play a significant role in guiding the school district’s work—now and 5 to 10 years forward—and will encourage all stakeholders to do their part in helping the district realize its vision.

Students

As engaged learners, our students will reach their full learning potential. They will be critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and effective communicators. What they experience as Gwinnett students will encourage their growth as curious, analytical, imaginative, and adaptable learners. They will take responsibility for their own learning, achievement, and behavior, making the most of opportunities in Gwinnett schools. Students will demonstrate high levels of character, taking pride in their school, community, and country. They will understand that America’s greatness is built upon three things... our form of government—a representative democracy; how we do business—our free-enterprise system; and how we educate our people—our system of public education. They will develop leadership and teamwork skills, preparing to be successful American citizens who function effectively in a global economy. Students will graduate with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to succeed in college, work, and life in the 21st century.

Employees

Gwinnett County Public Schools’ employees—teachers, administrators, and support personnel— will be committed to high expectations for student learning and will take responsibility for the results achieved. They will be caring, dedicated professionals who embrace lifelong learning, continuous improvement, and professional growth. Their effective use of data and information will improve teaching and learning and their own job performance. Employees will exhibit the highest ethical standards and will expect the same from their co-workers, students, and the school district.

Staff will work collaboratively across grade levels and across divisions to benefit students and the organization. They will be champions for all children and passionate advocates for strong public schools, believing public education is essential to America’s prosperity. School district employees will respect the differences and build on the rich diversity found within our student

body, our workforce, and our community. All employees will recognize how their daily work makes a difference in the lives of students and has a positive impact on the future of Gwinnett County, our state, and our nation. Employees who perform at high levels will be rewarded and recognized for their contributions to the district's success.

Parents and Guardians

As partners with the school, parents/guardians of Gwinnett students will support their children's education. They will be engaged with their children and teachers to optimize teaching and learning at school and in the home. They will reinforce high expectations for learning and behavior and will share accountability for their children's success at school. Families will encourage personal responsibility, regular attendance, and a strong work ethic. They will routinely communicate with teachers and the school, sharing information, concerns, and ideas. Parents and guardians will be well informed about their school's direction and initiatives, as well as those of the district. As a result, they will exhibit high levels of support for their schools and confidence in Gwinnett County Public Schools as a school system of choice.

Governance and Leadership

Beginning with the School Board and superintendent governance team, leaders at all levels in Gwinnett County Public Schools will be passionate about the district's vision, mission, and goals. They will embrace the Board's core beliefs and commitments and act accordingly in making decisions that affect students. Leaders will focus on results, particularly as they relate to students, and will value accountability. They will lead by example, energize others, and execute plans that turn vision into reality. Those who govern and those who lead will continually improve their own performance and increase the capacity of those with whom they work. They will promote a performance culture that helps others see how their work contributes to teaching and learning. They will encourage flexibility and innovation while setting high standards for their work and exhibit integrity and ethical behavior at all times. Leaders will ensure organizational coherence so that all aspects of the district support teaching and learning.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Gwinnett County Public Schools' core business is teaching and learning with an emphasis on learning. Curriculum, instruction, and assessments will be rigorous, integrated, and aligned. Innovative and challenging learning activities will be student-centered and designed for collaboration and flexibility. Proven, research-based Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies and appropriate technology will be used to engage students and to tailor instruction for different learners and learning styles. In meeting the needs of *all* students, schools will accelerate instruction not only for students who excel but also for those who are academically behind. Reading, writing, and mathematics—the foundations of learning—will be integrated into all content areas including languages, arts, sciences, and technology. In addition, Gwinnett's curriculum will emphasize development of media, technology and information-processing skills. A variety of assessments that are appropriate, timely, and ongoing will be employed as essential tools for measuring academic progress, evaluating performance, and guiding instruction. Teachers will use data to improve instruction and to increase academic achievement for each student. Continuous improvements in curriculum, instruction, and assessment will help students develop the skills required for success in a changing, competitive, global environment.

Facilities and Operations

The school system will look beyond today's classroom to provide learning environments for tomorrow's students, including alternative, non-traditional, and specialized academic programs. Schools will be designed, organized, and managed to allow the flexibility needed to serve students best. Our facilities will have the infrastructure and technological resources to advance teaching and learning. We will employ best practices in operations management, ensuring that buildings, grounds, and athletic facilities are safe, secure, attractive, energy-efficient, and well-maintained. Additionally, the school system will provide safe, reliable, efficient, and cost-effective transportation services. Using state-of-the-art design and construction techniques, innovative operational strategies, and conservation principles, we will continually improve our facilities and operations.

Financial Stewardship

The school district will be a responsible steward of taxpayers' money while providing the necessary resources to support world-class teaching and learning. We will continue to manage our financial resources through a transparent management system that meets or exceeds the highest standards in accounting and financial reporting. As a result, confidence will be high among citizens, financial institutions, and the agencies that regulate the district's fiscal operations. Budget decisions will be made with a long-term perspective to help ensure the district has adequate funds to meet both current and future needs. We will wisely use our limited financial resources while also pursuing additional sources of revenue. The school system will employ proven business practices and procedures at all times to ensure it meets the public's highest standards for accountability, integrity, and trust.

Information Management and Technology

Technology will permeate the education of Gwinnett's learners. Digital tools will expand the walls of the classroom, fostering collaboration and nurturing creativity and innovation in students and teachers. Appropriate technological tools and resources that are part of students' everyday, media-rich lives will be incorporated into the school day, making learning real and relevant to a student population that has never known a world without sophisticated technology. The district will provide a robust online environment to meet the evolving needs of students and staff and will promote safe, responsible use of technology. Employees will have the technology-based knowledge, skills, training, and tools they need to be effective in their jobs. Innovative technology will facilitate teaching and learning, enhance communication, strengthen the link between school and home, and ensure operational and analytical excellence in the day-to-day operations of the school system.

Communication

The school district will promote open, honest, reliable, two-way communication that builds trust and confidence within the school community. We will share accurate, timely, and relevant information with stakeholders through appropriate communication vehicles. We will be committed to public engagement so that students, parents, staff, and community members will be well informed and able to provide meaningful input regarding district issues. The school district will overcome communication challenges such as those associated with growth, language differences, and access to technology. Communication will promote and reinforce the school

system's reputation, conveying a clear and compelling story of our instructional and operational success. Effective communication will be everyone's responsibility.

Public Image and Community Pride

The school system will be a source of community pride and a major factor in the economic vitality of the county. The public will regard Gwinnett County Public Schools as the school system of choice, worthy of support and confidence. The district will attract new residents and employers, as well as new employees, with its reputation as a system of world-class schools. The school system will earn the trust of taxpayers through effective management of its financial, physical, and human resources. Our schools belong to the public. Therefore, the entire community has a stake in our success and will be supportive of our schools and the district. Good schools build good communities, and good communities sustain good schools. Gwinnett schools will benefit from a wide variety of business and community-based partnerships. In turn, our employees and students will contribute to the county's quality of life through their involvement in the community.

Conclusion

The *Strategic Priorities for 2010–2020* help form the foundation for the school district's strategic direction. They lead us to set goals that move us closer to realizing our vision of becoming a system of world-class schools. They drive continuous improvement in the district so that it is the learning organization it must be to succeed in a changing and competitive world. They keep us focused on our core business – teaching and learning – so we prepare today's students to take their place as tomorrow's leaders and successful citizens in the 21st century. Most importantly, the Strategic Priorities help ensure Gwinnett County Public Schools will do its part in building a better, stronger Gwinnett County... one whose citizens value public education and the rich heritage and culture of America.

Source. Gwinnett County Public Schools. 2010. Strategic priorities for 2010-2020.

[http://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/gcps-mainweb01.nsf/150D4B64C1B806308525779D005F3814/\\$file/FinalversionofStrategicPriorities.pdf](http://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/gcps-mainweb01.nsf/150D4B64C1B806308525779D005F3814/$file/FinalversionofStrategicPriorities.pdf) [Accessed November 17, 2011].